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SCIENCE, PSYCHIATRY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

# From Individual to Society: New Insights on Mental Health Care's Role in Social Justice

*A new study from Brazil challenges conventional mental health practices, advocating for socially sensitive therapy to empower individuals and address systemic inequities.*

By **Ally Riddle** - February 16, 2024

A new study led by Dominique P. Béhague of Vanderbilt University and Kings College London, along with her Brazilian colleagues, delves into the role of socially sensitive therapy in addressing mental health concerns.

Their results, published in Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology, present a compelling argument for a transformative approach to therapy, highlighting the limitations of current mental health policies that focus predominantly on individual-level interventions, often neglecting the broader social and political structures contributing to mental distress.

Drawing from the extensive 1982 Pelotas Birth Cohort study in Brazil, Béhague and her team reveal how socially sensitive therapy, grounded in the principles of Latin American social medicine, can empower individuals to address and challenge the systemic forces shaping their lives.

The authors write:

**"What seems to have made a difference for young people were therapists who responded flexibly, recognized the limits of their own**

**positionality, and maintained dialogic openness to unstructured reflection and the productivity of confrontation."**

They go on to add:

**"Young people who returned to the clinic, despite intense feelings of disappointment and mistrust, used the therapeutic encounter to engage in social and political debate and explore new modes of agency. Clinical interactions came to center not on the treatment of disorder or symptom-reduction, but on crafting self-worth, political awareness, and social influence."**

This research underscores the need for a shift in mental health practice, emphasizing the role of therapy not just in symptom management but as a catalyst for social and political activism, particularly for marginalized communities.

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Ally is pursuing a master's in interdisciplinary studies through New York University's XE: Experimental Humanities & Social Engagement. She uses the relationship between anthropology, public health, and the humanities to guide her research. Her current interests lie at the intersection of literature and psychology as a method to reframe the way we think about different mental states and experiences. Ally earned a bachelor's degree from the University of Minnesota in Biology, Society, & Environment.